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***Medieval Dutch Literature  
and  
Netherlandic Cultural Identity***

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# ***Medieval Dutch Literature and Netherlandic Cultural Identity***

Since NIAS prefers to view itself as 'a place to think', it may be appropriate for me not to present any answers to you this afternoon, but instead to put before you two questions that I find extremely puzzling and that indeed give plenty of food for thought. The two questions are the following: Did Dutch literature have an identity of its own as early as the Middle Ages? And if so, does this bear any relation to characteristics that are considered typical of Dutch literature in later periods, possibly even of Dutch literature today, and, who knows, even of the Dutch national character as such?

A century ago these questions would have been considered rhetorical rather than problematical. At that time no one doubted that there was such a thing as a Dutch national character, nor was there any doubt that this national character was reflected in Dutch literature from the earliest times to what was then the present. In fact, it was this very conviction that legitimised the genre of literary history, which had come into being as a scholarly branch of the massive tree of nineteenth-century nationalism. All over Europe great scholars felt called upon to lay out, in prestigious standard works, how their beloved nation had in the course of time manifested itself, indeed realised itself in literature. That the European nations were true and independent nations could be seen most clearly in the individual way in which each language – language being one of the most essential characteristics of a nation – had created its own artistic tradition throughout the ages. This started a cycle of mutually reinforcing ideas: the literary histories written in this glorious pioneering age were both the fruit of and the soil for contemporary nationalism.

As far as Dutch literature is concerned, this European phenomenon found its most impressive representative in the work of Willem Jozef Andries Jonckbloet, the spiritual father of all those studying Dutch literature, the first to hold an

independent chair in Dutch literature and its history.<sup>1</sup> In Jonckbloet's great literary history there is therefore not a shadow of doubt that as early as the Middle Ages, Dutch literature was rooted in the national character of the Low Countries. The first crown witness in this case was, of course, the great thirteenth-century poet Jacob van Maerlant. That one generation later Jan van Boendale had called him *vader der Dietse dichteren algader*, "the father of all Middle Dutch poets", was further evidence for Jonckbloet that Maerlant was indeed the first poet who was a Dutchman in the truest sense of the word.

At the same time, however, patriarch Maerlant was an antihero, because his extensive oeuvre had put a stranglehold on true literary art. After all, it was Jacob van Maerlant who had given the imaginative romances of chivalry short shrift and had put his *nutscap ende waer*, his "usefulness and truth", in their place, thus bringing the imagination, the soul of all poetry, under the yoke of didacticism. In Jonckbloet's eyes, this was a deathblow to art but at the same time an historical inevitability, because the Dutch national character was and is bourgeois through and through, and hence devoted to utility and levelheadedness, and not open to the imaginative. Like son, like father; that is how Dutch literature got the patriarch it deserved. A nation of drudges produces poets who are plodders too.

*Simplex vere sigillum* was what one of Jonckbloet's most formidable predecessors at the Leiden Academy, Boerhaave, had taught: simplicity is the hallmark of truth. But in our own days no serious literary historian will dare to sell as truth the stark simplicity and, in a sense, beauty of Jonckbloet's construction. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, postmodernism and all that have made us sceptical about overly simplistic historical models. Secondly, our view of Maerlant has changed quite considerably, which makes it problematic, to say the least, to still present him as an icon of the pragmatic middle-class Dutch national character.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, the whole notion of national character, national identity, or whatever we wish to call it, has become suspect. We have come to realise the extent to which

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<sup>1</sup> W.P. Gerritsen, "'De lust voor dezen studievak'. De medioneerlandicus en zijn publiek", in F.P. van Oostrom, ed., *Misselijke tonghe. De Middelnederlandse letterkunde in interdisciplinair verband* (Amsterdam 1991) 171-87; F.P. van Oostrom, "Jonckbloet, de grondlegger", *Literatuur* 6 (1989), special issue *Levend begraven? Erflaters van de Nederlandse literatuurgeschiedenis*, 325-28.

<sup>2</sup> F.P. van Oostrom, "Maerlant voor stad en burgerij", in H. Pleij and others, *Op belofte van profijt. Stadsliteratuur en burgermoraal in de Nederlandse letterkunde van de middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam 1991) 52-68; F.P. van Oostrom, *Maerlants wereld* (Amsterdam 1996).

the nineteenth century projected what were mainly its own preoccupations onto such concepts, and moreover we have experienced the horrors to which these kinds of notions have led in twentieth-century Europe. It is the latter reason in particular, which in my view very quickly tends to make us suspicious of any discussion about supposed national characteristics and ditto literatures.

And even if this does not hold us back and we try to approach this matter with an open mind, it is undeniable that under the heading of the supposed individuality of nations, peoples, and literatures a lot of mumbo jumbo has been written. Usually this sort of discussion suffers poignantly from what is, of course, always a problem in approaching history: that we, blinded by the love of our own hypothesis, make a selection from the infinite and highly varied range history has to offer, and, either consciously or unconsciously, choose only those items that suit our purpose, and then create a so-called identity on the basis of this eclecticism, completely forgetting that there are plenty of counter examples.

So both on principal grounds and from a scholarly point of view, by far the wisest thing to do would be, therefore, to stay away from these kinds of chimaeras. In any case it seems sheer madness to enlarge any odd constellation of notions in order to arrive at a characterisation of the Dutch national character; to then apply this to Dutch literature; and finally, to make matters even worse, to try, by hook or by crook, to present this as a continuity between the Middle Ages and the present day. Even those who argue that one of the duties of scholarship is to dare to generalise will have to recognise that the wealth of historical and literary material that we have at our disposal is at odds with such reductionism.

And yet, although I am partial to the point of view I have just presented, while studying medieval Dutch literature over the past fifteen years I have repeatedly come across material which seemed to validate the kind of views which I had so happily brushed aside. At first I tended to ignore this, not taking any note of it; and even later on I still could not view what I had stumbled on as anything more than a string of unconnected coincidences. Now, however, it strikes me that such a clear pattern is beginning to emerge that it is time to come clean.

Like so many other Middle Dutch romances, the *Torec*, one of a number of texts about King Arthur and his Round Table, is derived from an Old French original. In one of this work's most remarkable scenes, the protagonist Torec witnesses a conversation in a council chamber in a castle where he is staying as a guest. In the

Old French original the conversation is about love, and especially about which is higher: the love of a married lady or that of an unmarried damsel. In the Middle Dutch adaptation this courtly dispute is dealt with in a few words, and the emphasis is squarely on a discussion about the bad state the world is in, more especially about the fact that those in high positions prefer money to virtue. Thus a playful discourse about love is transformed into an ethical group discussion about government.<sup>3</sup>

The Middle Dutch adaptor of the *Torec* was none other than Jacob van Maerlant, who could be expected to make changes like this. But there are other Middle Dutch romances that are more deeply imbued with moralistic intentions than their French originals. *Lantsloot vander Haghedochte*, one of the thirteenth-century adaptations of the *Lancelot en prose*, presents the Arthurian heroes much more emphatically as role models worthy of imitation than is the case in the French text.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle Dutch adaptation, the heroes are never fearful and always polite; the rough edges which the French text occasionally gives them are smoothed away by the Middle Dutch poet to make them fit the mould of knights without fear or reproach. While many of the French Arthurian romances present the hero Gauvain, one of Arthur's most important retainers, in a very ironic light, few if any traces of this ironic tradition can be found in the stories about Gauvain's Middle Dutch counterpart, Walewein. It would appear that Middle Dutch poets were not at all keen on stories in which the heroes are presented with a smile or a wink, and they used every means to create honourable characters. The underlying ethical or at least educational intentions of the authors are unmistakable: their heroes were expected to serve as flawless role models for their audience.

And it must not be forgotten that romances are one of the least didactic medieval literary genres, and that although there were a great many Middle Dutch representatives of this genre (translations, adaptations as well as completely home-grown products), they mainly follow a European vernacular trend and do not lead the way in any sense. Middle Dutch literature *does* lead the way as far as didacticism *pur sang* is concerned. This is where Jacob van Maerlant carries the

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<sup>3</sup> Van Oostrom (Amsterdam 1996) 238-41.

<sup>4</sup> F.P. van Oostrom, *Lantsloot vander Haghedochte. Onderzoekingen over een Middelnederlandse bewerking van de Lancelot en prose* (Amsterdam 1981).

banner, of course. In many cases, he was the first European writer to turn instructive Latin material into the vernacular. But in Maerlant's wake comes a whole fleet of texts which are either original Middle Dutch creations, or very early, and often creative, adaptations of Latin (and sometimes French) didactic material. Even though it is not done nowadays to trace this phenomenon directly to the bourgeoisie, it is an unmistakable fact that thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Middle Dutch literature is characterised by a proliferation of didactic and moralistic texts.<sup>5</sup>

This dominance of moralism and didacticism continues until the late Middle Ages. Of course, this is not an exclusively Middle Dutch phenomenon; yet from a comparative European perspective – although very little research has been done into this so far – it seems more emphatically present in our parts than it is elsewhere. Studies about literature at the court of Holland-Bavaria have shown that its *basso continuo* was its didactic tendency.<sup>6</sup> Even the master of irony at the court in The Hague, Dirc Potter, embeds his entertaining tales in a didactic framework, although it is debatable how serious he really was about this. At any rate, it is significant that Ingeborg Glier's broad study of late-medieval Germanic love poetry – the so-called *Minnereden* – found that a didactic tendency was particularly noticeable in the Middle Dutch Haags *liederenhandschrift*, a collection of courtly love lyrics to which she applied the label "Traktatstil".<sup>7</sup> And when Professor Van Elslander carried out his pioneering research into *rederijkersrefreinen*, he noticed two interrelated characteristics that distinguish the Dutch *refreinen* from the French refrains with which they are so closely connected: the Dutch *refreinen* are longer ... and more moralistic.<sup>8</sup>

All this can serve as evidence which provides food for thought in the best sense of the word. Compared to other European literatures, Middle Dutch literature

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<sup>5</sup> J. Reynaert and others, *Wat is wijsheid? Lekenethiek in de Middelnederlandse letterkunde* (Amsterdam 1994).

<sup>6</sup> F.P. van Oostrom, *Het woord van eer. Literatuur aan het Hollandse hof omstreeks 1400* (Amsterdam 1987) especially 284-86; English translation: *Court and Culture. Dutch Literature, 1350-1450* (Berkeley 1992) especially 278-80.

<sup>7</sup> I. Glier, *Artes amandi, Untersuchung zu Geschichte, Überlieferung und Typologie der deutschen Minnereden* (Munich 1971) 278.

<sup>8</sup> A. van Elslander, *Het refrein in de Nederlanden tot 1600* (Ghent 1953) especially 56, 65, 266. Of course, the wealth of late-medieval Dutch literature also has its counter examples: for instance see H. Pleij, "De oudste schaapherderskalender (1511) teruggevonden", in W.P. Gerritsen, ed., *Een school spierinkjes. Kleine opstellen over Middelnederlandse artesliteratuur* (Hilversum 1991) 145-48.

clearly appears to be characterised by an extra dose of seriousness and moralism. As you all know, it is precisely these two characteristics which are often cited as mainstays of Dutchness in much later periods. One of the best studies I know about Dutch identity, Ernest Zahn's *Regenten, rebellen en reformatoren*, calls a preoccupation with ethical issues the most essential Dutch characteristic, and describes this as a mental attitude which dominates the thinking and actions of the church, as well as the liberals and the social democrats.<sup>9</sup> Ethics also continue to dominate the literary sphere until the present day. As Ton Anbeek has observed, the *Tachtigers* with their *l'art pour l'art* philosophy seem nothing more than an un-Dutch intermezzo. That is why Anbeek considers Herman Gorter's development symptomatic of Dutch literature: a development from aesthete to prophet is the royal road in a literature full of *domineeszoontjes*, preachers' sons, like Gorter himself.<sup>10</sup>

For all its openness to foreign influences, Anbeek observes that Dutch literature has a quite considerable individuality of its own, which emphatically shapes the foreign movements it admits according to its own tastes. It is striking how often foreign fashions are muted and toned down here. Although the Dutch like to think of themselves as tolerant, they are clearly averse to extremism, and strongly inclined to moderation. This applies to our social system, our education, and our whole cultural climate. To give but a few examples, the contrasts between the rich and the poor are relatively small; there is a strong aversion to any kind of hierarchy; and admission to universities is decided by lottery. This equalising tendency manifests itself in all aspects of Dutch life, and leads to a monarchy with a very human face, as well as the widely accepted practice of having guests assist in doing the dishes. Even Johan Crujff must not think too highly of himself, and our Nobel Prize winners – who may well be so few and far between precisely because of this mentality – are preferably shown on television while they are washing their car. This feeling for belittlement is even reflected in the Dutch language, with its infinite capacity to form diminutives: Holland is a country where one likes to sit *met de buurtjes op zijn gemakje in het zonnetje op een terrasje, met een glaasje en een sigaretje*. This cultural climate with its strong focus on

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<sup>9</sup> E Zahn, *Regenten, rebellen en reformatoren. Een visie op Nederland en de Nederlanders*, second edition (Amsterdam 1991).

<sup>10</sup> T. Anbeek, "Nooit te", *Literatuur* 11 (1994) 20-21.



*nivellering*, levelling out differences, might in my view even explain why the humane *Lion King* caught on in Holland, whereas the hysteric *Batman* did not. And on a more serious level, it may explain why the extreme variants of political correctness have so far completely passed Dutch universities by.

Dutch literature too prefers the reasonable centre ground, and takes the rough edges off foreign fashions. In Holland Romanticism with its *Sturm und Drang* amounted to little more than the leisure activities of a few Leiden student clubs who had nothing better to do.<sup>11</sup> Decadentism undoubtedly left its mark on Dutch literature, but the *Tachtigers* and Louis Couperus shied away from what they considered to be its excesses.<sup>12</sup> There is little if any Dadaism in Dutch literature, no Surrealism, and not a great deal of Expressionism either.<sup>13</sup> The *nouveau roman* never really got off the ground, and what passes for dirty realism in our parts is far from hard core, if we once more accept Ton Anbeek's expert judgment. The Dutch view of all this exuberance can be summed up with the clever slogan thought up by an advertising agency – the very people who, by virtue of their profession, know more about our national character than any scholar. To tempt the Dutch to smoke Havannas, they advertised them as: *een tikkeltje te wild, misschien*, a touch too wild perhaps.

It seems to me that this cult of the happy mean contributes a great deal to the pleasant social climate in Holland. In any case, I feel fortunate to live in a society where captains of industry have an annual income of only a few million guilders at the most and where elderly people who are ailing are nursed with great care. But I must admit that this tendency to level out differences is not always very beneficial from an artistic point of view. After all, to a large extent the power of art lies in contrast and enlargement. As soon as artists water down what they make, their art easily loses its strength. That is probably why Holland has such a long-standing tradition of artists, and not the worst either, leaving their country to seek more room to breathe. Whether it is Paul Verhoeven or Karel Appel, Gerrit Komrij or Rudy Kousbroek, or Gerard Reve, W.F. Hermans, and Cees Nooteboom,

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<sup>11</sup> P. van Zonneveld, "13 maart 1835: Nicolaas Beets ontvangt vriendenlof voor zijn dichtstuk 'De masquerade' - Een bijdrage aan de discussie over de romantiek in Nederland", in M. A. Schenkelveld-van der Dussen, ed., *Nederlandse literatuur, een geschiedenis* (Groningen 1993) 444-48.

<sup>12</sup> J. Goedegebuure, *Decadentie en literatuur* (Amsterdam 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Anbeek (1994) 20-21.

in one way or another they all rally behind Slauerhoff's sardonic poem "In Nederland wil ik niet leven":

*"In Nederland wil ik niet leven.  
Men moet er steeds zijn lusten rewen  
Ter wille van de goede buren  
Die gretig door elk gaatje gluren."*

literally:

"Holland is not the place I want to live in.  
One always has to harness one's desires  
For the sake of one's good neighbours  
Who eagerly peep through every little hole."

In Slauerhoff's track, many of our artists went abroad, away from Dutch stuffiness and pettiness, to find the exuberance which is part and parcel of real art. That the writers among them have all returned one by one with their tails between their legs probably proves not only that they were more Dutch than they wished to be, but also that a writer's instrument, his mother tongue, is not easy to maintain in a foreign-language environment.

It cannot possibly be a coincidence that the Dutch writers who are generally regarded as the greatest artists have convincingly broken away from the Dutch *nivellering*, levelling tendency. The best witness in this respect is of course Multatuli, who would never compromise, just about the only writer who is considered a genius in a country that recognises hardly any other geniuses, and rather likes it that way. Multatuli may have to share his place of honour among Dutch writers of genius with one other superior talent: with Willem *die Madocke makede*, the author of the thirteenth-century beast epic *Van den vos Reynaerde*. His place of honour in our literary history is all the more remarkable because his masterpiece is not actually an original creation but an adaptation of a foreign source. And the *Roman de Renart* does not nearly have the same status in French literature as *Van den vos Reynaerde* enjoys with us. To argue that this is because the French have much more to choose from, and that with us it is a case of the one-eyed man being king in the country of the blind, would be worse than cheap. Something very different would appear to be at issue here.

This was pointed out very clearly in André Bouwman's astute analysis of the *Reinaert* in relation to its French sources.<sup>14</sup> In his adaptation Willem takes great liberties with his French model. In itself this is far from unique, since medieval literature is usually more a matter of adaptation than of translation. What is highly exceptional, however, is the nature of Willem's adaptations. The most striking tendency that can be observed in the adaptation techniques used in *Van den vos Reynaerde* is what Bouwman calls *conflictverscherping*, "conflict intensification". In the Middle Dutch version, the battle between Reinaert and King Nobel's court is fiercer, crueller, more a matter of life and death even, and Reinaert treats his opponents accordingly. This results in a story full of sharp contrasts – and that is what to us makes it such an impressive work of art.

But just as the indomitable Multatuli in his time was the great exception to the generally reserved manner of his contemporaries, the writer of the *Reinaert* would appear to have been equally exceptional in the Middle Ages. On the whole, Middle Dutch writers tended to moderate and temper their sources. It would appear that even in the medieval period Dutch writers had great reservations about exuberance and preferred to mitigate shrillness. In the *Lantsloot vander Haghedochte*, unlike the *Lancelot en prose*, knights do not weep, they do not embrace each other, and they are less cruel in battle.<sup>15</sup> The Middle Dutch adaptation of the *Roman de la rose* deliberately leaves out the most frivolous passages.<sup>16</sup> Several naughty French fabliaux were rendered into Middle Dutch, but the most scurrilous remained untranslated.<sup>17</sup> And it may also be significant that Middle Dutch sources provide far less evidence of the reception of the Tristan story than do their French, German and English counterparts. It would appear that the "Absolutheitsanspruch des Eros" which the *Tristan* proclaims so impressively to us today was met with more reservation in the Low Countries than elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> It is also striking that the most popular Arthurian name given to French boys in the Middle Ages was that of Tristan, while in the Low Countries Walewein occurred

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<sup>14</sup> A. Th. Bouwman, *Reinaert en Renart. Het dierenepos Van den vos Reynaerde vergeleken met de Oudfranse Roman de Renart*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Van Oostrom (Amsterdam 1981) especially chapter V.

<sup>16</sup> E. Verwijs, ed., *Die Rose* (The Hague 1868) xx. A somewhat similar example is recorded by A. van Berkum in his edition of *Parthonopeus van Bloys* (Leiden 1898) xliii.

<sup>17</sup> F. Lodder, *Lachen om list en lust* (Ridderkerk 1997).

<sup>18</sup> W.P. Gerritsen, ed., *Van Aiol tot de Zwaanridder. Personages uit de middeleeuwse verhaalkunst en hun voortleven in literatuur, theater en beeldende kunst* (Nijmegen 1993) 322-24.

most frequently.<sup>19</sup> One would almost be tempted to say that while, as early as the Middle Ages, every Frenchman's ideal was a passionate affair with the wife of his highest boss, the Dutch idea of heroism was loyalty to a noble cause. The Dutch role model is less grand, less glorious, but also less problematical and risky, and more restrained. In this light, it is hardly surprising that Seneca's ideas received an earlier vernacular reception in our parts than in the rest of Europe.<sup>20</sup> It also seems far from coincidental that Huizinga's majestic sketch of the exuberance of the waning Middle Ages is entirely based on French sources. It would have been virtually impossible for this brilliant cultural historian to have painted life's fierceness in equally shrill colours if he had used Dutch sources from the same period.

In short, it would appear that both moralism and the *nivelleringscultus*, the two mainstays of Dutch cultural identity, have very ancient roots, going back deep into the Middle Ages. This makes finding an *explanation* for this intellectual climate all the more pressing. One thing is certain: Calvinism cannot be held responsible. Dutch literature seems to have been run by *dominees* long before the Reformation. Although Calvinism is easily blamed for everything in Holland that smacks of reserve and self-restraint, it cannot be the *primum mobile* in this case. Instead, a very different causality seems worth considering: it was so easy for Calvinism to take root in our country because it found a ready and fertile field here, which was ripe for the seed of the Reformation.

In this connection, the *Devotio Moderna* should be mentioned. However deeply it was anchored within the Catholic church, its emphasis on the internalisation and sobriety of the way its followers should experience the faith definitely was something the Reformation was to stress even more. In other respects, the *Devotio Moderna* was an icon of Dutchness as well, witness its predilection for diminutives, such as Thomas a Kempis's *met een boekske in een hoekske*, and the splendid Windesheim expression for what in many other countries would have been accorded the full title of genius: *een vonkske dat af en toe wat gloeien wilde*, "a small spark which would occasionally glow somewhat".

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<sup>19</sup> For France, see M. Pastoureau, *Coleurs, images, symboles. Études d'histoire et d'anthropologie* (Paris 1989) 118; for the Low Countries, see J.D. Janssens in *Arturus rex*, vol.1 (Louvain 1987) 113-18.

<sup>20</sup> See Reynart (Amsterdam 1994) via the Index and H. Pleij, "De laatmiddeleeuwse rederijkersliteratuur als vroeghumanistische overtuigingskunst", *Jaarboek Fontaine* 34 (1984) 65-95.

But it did not all start with the *Devotio Moderna* either. Such characteristics can be seen in Dutch literature as early as the thirteenth century. Unlike in the language areas surrounding us, the most beautifully decorated early-Middle Dutch codices, in other words the books on which the contemporary reading public was prepared to spend most money, were not romances. Compared to other countries, the Middle Dutch representatives of this genre are, in fact, characterised by a fairly modest codification. The most beautiful book that has come down to us from the earliest period of Middle Dutch literature is the *Nederrijns moraalboek*: a sumptuous late-thirteenth-century manuscript which was probably produced for the count and countess of Guelders.<sup>21</sup> It would be hard to imagine a manuscript the content of which would be better suited to serve as the princely opening of Middle Dutch literature. The book contains a trilogy of texts consisting of a treatise on pragmatic morality, a series of gnomic sayings and wise lessons, and a love bestiary which stresses the torments that accompany love. In the over seven hundred years of cultural history which Holland has witnessed since, one of the sayings from this book could easily have remained a great success as a maxim printed on a tile to be hung on the wall: *En gene sake en makt den minsche so blode als sine conscientie diene begript van sinen quaden levne*, "nothing scares a man so much as his conscience reproaching him for his sinful life".<sup>22</sup> For a moment it seems as if Calvinism had been made a state religion at the court of Guelders as early as the thirteenth century.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this magical mystery tour of early-Dutch literature. First of all, we are once again expressly confronted with the great formative significance which the Middle Ages have for Netherlandic culture. These days the medieval period does not exactly suffer from a lack of attention in Holland, but it is important to blow its trumpet once more in this context. After all, when participants in discussions about Dutch identity take the trouble to consider this matter in a broad historical perspective, they still take the Golden Age as their most important point of reference. In itself this is understandable, since this was the time of Holland's greatest glory, and of icons of Dutchness, such as the Dutch Revolt, the Netherlands East India Company, Vondel, Cats, Rembrandt

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<sup>21</sup> T. Meder, "Proza voor graaf Reinald I van Gelre", *Gelders erfgoed*, no. 6 (1992) 1-3 and D. Hogenelst and F.P. van Oostrom, *Handgeschreven wereld. Nederlandse literatuur en cultuur in de middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam 1995) 235.

<sup>22</sup> M. Gysseling, ed., *Corpus van Middelnederlandse teksten tot en met het jaar 1300*, vol. 2, no. 6, 389, 11. 25-26.

and Vermeer. Yet this Golden Age was certainly no Big Bang in the development of what one might, with due caution, refer to as the Dutch identity.

The second main conclusion I would draw relates to a metalevel of analysis. In spite of my initial reservations, I have become convinced that matters like these, that is, discussions about the characteristic features of Dutch literature and culture and how these have changed or remained constant through the ages, definitely warrant serious research. We must not allow these kinds of issues to remain the domain of uninformed chitchat or of the cheap cultural politics of the day. There is more than enough material to provide serious food for thought. And however difficult and slippery they may be, we must not try to evade these issues or turn up our noses at them. On the contrary, the quality of the thinking about these matters would benefit a great deal from contributions from a wide range of disciplines and approaches.

Allow me to make a final point in relation to this. Research into cultural identity has always greatly benefitted from observations by *foreigners* about the country in question. Like anthropologists who are both observers of and participants in the culture they study, they often strike the right balance between involvement and critical distance, which enables them to provide very penetrating insights. In this respect, the foreign NIAS Fellows could make a very valuable contribution to our definition and understanding of Dutch identity if they were prepared to communicate their impressions of our country to a wider audience, for instance in a series of columns by several authors in a newspaper like *NRC Handelsblad*.

At the same time we must not forget that in another respect NIAS is just about the worst place on earth to get to know Dutch identity: it is situated in Wassenaar, the village where our country's equalising tendencies are least obvious, and it is peopled by fellows selected for their excellence – one of the few counterbalances to the cult of equality, which also has a considerable grip on Dutch academia. It is no coincidence that NIAS was nearly closed in 1982. That this did not happen then, and that there is no threat whatsoever of this happening now – on the contrary – is due not only to the excellent way in which the Directorate and Staff of NIAS itself operate, but especially to the sterling quality of the work done by all the fellows here. The reason it provides such an impressive stimulus is probably because NIAS combines the best of both worlds in a salutary fashion: in the best Dutch tradition, a stay here is *rustig, nuttig and gezellig* – but above all, thinking and scholarly activity are fed by un-Dutch passion.

## About The Author

Frits P. van Oostrom (1953), a NIAS Fellow in 1986/87 and 1994/95, was appointed Chair of Historical Dutch Literature at Leiden University in 1982, a position he holds to the present day. Since 1989 he has also been Head of the research group Dutch Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages, which aims to examine medieval Dutch literature within its own historical context. In 1995 the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) awarded him the prestigious Spinoza Prize for Advanced Research.

While at NIAS Professor van Oostrom wrote both of his prize-winning books: *Het woord van eer. Literatuur aan het Hollandse hof omstreeks 1400* (Amsterdam 1987), which appeared in translation as *Court and Culture. Dutch Literature, 1350-1450* (Berkeley 1992) and his most recent publication *Maerlants wereld* (Amsterdam 1996), which brought him the AKO Literature Prize in 1996.





## UHLENBECK LECTURES

Uhlenbeck Lectures are organised by the NIAS Fellows Association NFA to honour the founder of the Institute, Dr. E.M. Uhlenbeck, Professor of Linguistics and Javanese Language and Literature at Leiden University from 1950-1983 and Chairman of the NIAS Board from 1970-1983.

Previous Uhlenbeck Lectures were:

1. 1983: E.M. Uhlenbeck *Linguistics: Neither Psychology nor Sociology*  
Published by NIAS, 1983
2. 1984: N. Luhmann *The 'State' of the Political System*  
Published by NIAS, 1984
3. 1985: G. Steiner *Word and Logos*  
Published as: *Woord en Rede. Pleidooi voor een ethische literatuurbeschouwing*  
by Goossens, Tricht, 1985
4. 1986: M. Fuhrmann *Die humanistische Bildung des 19. Jahrhunderts und was davon erhaltenswert gewesen wäre*  
Unpublished
5. 1987: A.J.F. Köbben *Interests, Partiality and the Scholar*  
Published by NIAS, 1987
6. 1988: G. Modelski *Is America's Decline Inevitable?*  
Published by NIAS, 1988
7. 1989: P.W. Klein *The Monetisation of the Dutch East Indies: A Case of Changing Continuity, 1602-1942*  
Published by NIAS, 1989
8. 1990: M. Blaug *The Economic Value of Higher Education*  
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9. 1991: Esther Cohen *Gift, Payment and the Sacred in Medieval Popular Religiosity*  
Published by NIAS, 1991
10. 1992: P.H. Kooijmans *Maintaining the Peace in the Shadowland Between the Old and the New International Order*  
Published by NIAS, 1992
11. 1993: Wolf Lepenies *Toleration in the New Europe: Three Tales*  
Published by NIAS, 1993
12. 1994: Kristofer Schipper *The Gene Bank of Culture: Reflections on the Function of the Humanities*  
Published by NIAS, 1994
13. 1995: Terence J. Anderson *The Battles of Hastings: Four Stories in Search of a Meaning*  
Published by NIAS, 1996
14. 1996: Maarten Brands *The Obsolescence of almost all Theories concerning International Relations*  
Published by NIAS, 1997